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EVALUATING PARTICIPATION IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

The Brundtland Commission argued that the first step in the pursuit of sustainable development is 'a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision-making' (WCED 1987). The Commission recognised that 'The law alone cannot enforce the common interest. It principally needs community knowledge and support, which entails greater public participation in the decisions which affect the environment.' (ibid). Agenda 21 itself also includes numerous references to the need for community and public participation (Warburton 1998).

In the UK, securing citizen participation has become a central theme in the programmes of the current government to 'modernise government' at local and national levels, and thus to strengthen democracy. This approach has also been central to the UK Strategy for Sustainable Development, which stated that 'Public involvement is essential for truly sustainable community' (DETR 1999), and to earlier work on Local Agenda 21. While participation has been recognised as central to achieving sustainable development since Brundtland, the reverse is also apparently the case: some research suggests that increasing citizen engagement has been the key achievement of Local Agenda 21.

This paper draws on recent (and longer term) research on public and other stakeholder participation in Local Agenda 21 in the UK to assess the extent and types of participatory working that has been attempted within this programme. These are important themes in UK public policy: UK Government figures published in December 2000 suggest that 93% of UK local authorities had completed a Local Agenda 21 strategy by that date (the original deadline set by the Prime Minister), and official Government guidance encourages future community strategies (the mechanism for planning public services in localities) to be based on the work of the LA21 programme and to focus on improving the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the local community.

However, although the principle of increasing participation by people in the decisions which affect them is now widely accepted in both sustainable development and wider public policy areas, it remains the case that most projects and programmes by the public and private (and voluntary) sectors proceed with little or no public participation. The focus in this presentation will be to examine why this might be, and how more effective evaluation of

participation (including participatory evaluation) may help overcome some of the key barriers to greater citizen ivolvement in sustainable development.

The presentation will draw primarily on the work of InterAct, an an alliance of experienced practitioners, researchers, writers and policy makers in the field of public participation and stakeholder engagement. InterAct believes that a more consistent and strategic approach to public and stakeholder engagement is fundamental to democratic renewal, social inclusion, sustainable development and a vibrant civil society, and that such challenging and complex issues can only be tackled by processes that take full advantage of the added value that comes from wide ranging participation and collaboration.

In 2001, InterAct published a simple framework for evaluating participation in order to contribute to the debate on participatory working, as well as providing a simple mechanism for practical use. The aim was to find ways of assessing what works and what does not, in participatory working, and therefore to improve practice, build support for participatory ways of working, and improve conventional projects through participatory evaluation. The framework has already been trialled in an EU LIFE funded project on participatory river basin management, and will continue to be developed in the near future. The framework focuses on what to look for in participatory projects, and how to do it, and includes some examples of indicators and criteria for assessing success.

In summary, citizen participation and sustainable development have become key themes in mainstream public policy agendas at local and national government levels in the UK. This paper reports on these themes and how they have operated in practice, and offers a framework for more effective future evaluation of these participatory processes.

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The importance of public participation to sustainable development has long been recognised. Agenda 21 stresses how the successful implementation of sustainable development is 'first and foremost the responsibility of Governments [but] ... the broadest public participation ... should also be encouraged' (Agenda 21, para 1.3). Subsequent European, national and local programmes to promote sustainable development have continued to promote participatory approaches. The principle of increasing participation by people in the decisions which affect them is now widely accepted in both sustainable development and other public policy areas.

This paper describes these trends, and examines the implications for evaluation processes. It distinguishes between the evaluation of participation and participatory approaches to evaluation, examines some current approaches, and discusses how a new 'virtuous circle' of evaluation methodologies can begin to be developed which can address some of the potential tensions and contribute to the effective implementation of sustainable development.

Participation in sustainable development

Participatory approaches have been core to implementing sustainable development from the very beginning. The Brundtland Commission (the World Commission on Environment and Development - WCED) argued that the first step in pursuit of sustainable development required 'a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision-making' (WCED 1987). The rationale for the priority given by the Commission to participation was that 'The law alone cannot enforce the common interest. It principally needs community knowledge and support, which entails greater public participation in the decisions which affect the environment.' (ibid). The Commission suggests that the best way of doing this is by 'decentralising the management of resources upon which local communities depend, and giving these communities an effective say over the use of these resources. It will also require promoting citizens' initiatives, empowering people's organisations, and strengthening local democracy.' These approaches have remained central to all projects and programmes promoting wider participation in sustainable development.

Agenda 21 takes up the theme, with paragraph 3.2 stating that 'An effective strategy for tackling the problems of poverty, development and environment simultaneously should begin by focusing on resources, production and people and ... a democratic participation process in association with improved governance' (United Nations 1992). These general principles are repeated throughout Chapter 28 of Agenda 21, which stresses the importance of involving all sectors of society, especially those which are often excluded from policy processes (eg women, young people, etc). Paragraph 3 of Chapter 28 defines the process of Local Agenda 21:

> "Each local authority should enter into a dialogue with its citizens, local organisations and private enterprises and adopt a Local Agenda 21. Through consultation and consensus-building, local authorities would learn from citizens and from local civic, community, business and industrial organisations and acquire the information needed for formulating the best strategies. The process of consultation would increase household awareness of sustainable development issues."

The importance of participatory approaches to sustainable development continues to grow. For some, this is linked to growing government and other institutional understanding of sustainable development since 1992, with a greater recognition now that sustainable development is much more than environmental issues. New priority issues for sustainable development at local level are now beginning to include poverty reduction, equity, social justice and security. In order to tackle these issues, and to tackle the causes as well as the effects of social, economic and environmental problems in order to make development sustainable (through aiming for prevention as well as cure), the participation of various constituencies, stakeholders and citizens, is vital to ensuring governance systems are seen to be legitimate, credible, respected and trusted by those they seek to serve. As a ICLEI report suggests: 'Governments cannot hope to achieve sustainability without the active and willing participation of their citizens and their trust that

government is acting for their best interests. Good governance has been held back by sceptical views of government, including a lack of accountability to constituents, insufficient involvement of citizens in the political process, inadequate representation of all stakeholder interests, insufficient transparency in the governing process, and corruption.' (ICLEI 2001).

The UN Commission for Sustainable Development has recently stated its renewed commitment to participatory approaches, saying that 'Participation generates shared values, mutually reinforcing commitments, joint ownership and partnership, which are crucial to achieving sustainable development' (CSD 2002). Local government clearly has a key role as champions and facilitators of sustainable development, with a crucial part of their role being to have 'developed participatory, multistakeholder strategies to implement sustainable development. They have promoted local governance involving the recognition of the importance of transparency, accountability and participation in governance' among other priorities (eg the importance of integration of policy and practice, strategic partnerships and information, knowledge and capacity building) (ICLEI 2001). Local governments have also 'come to recognise the importance of information-sharing, enhanced roles for civil society and other partners, and a participatory and integrated approach to the incremental implementation of sustainability' (ibid).

The continuing emphasis on participatory working does, however, place new responsibilities on government at all levels to develop their capacity to evaluate how and why these new approaches are working. And at present there is little guidance available to help them. As the CSD points out, 'Capacity development in monitoring and evaluation approaches, to support the learning and to improve public sector management and performance, including the use of participatory approaches and sustainable development indicators and complementary qualitative techniques' (CSD 2002, para 241).

What is meant by participation?

Participation has been an essential element of anti-poverty and community development strategies since the UN Decade of Development in the 1950s. Then, participatory development was seen as an antidote to the failure of conventional development programmes to tackle what were seen as the root causes of poverty. The motivation then, as now, was to give more respect to the knowledge and experience of ordinary people in identifying the basic problems they were facing, and possible solutions, and not just relying on professionals, scientists, academics and technicians. In the UK, there was a major period of growth in participatory working, and wider engagement in policy debates, from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. The current wave of expansion in participatory projects and programmes began again in the mid-1990s and (to date) that growth continues.

Examples in the UK now include extensive public participation in policy programmes on regeneration, health management, social exclusion, environmental management, social welfare and youth programmes, and others. The types of participation range from providing more information about public programmes, through simple surveys, focus groups and questionnaires designed to test public opinion, through extensively resourced deliberative processes (such as citizens' juries) which take evidence over an extended period of time and come to conclusions which may (in some cases) be binding on the institutions which commission them, formal and informal partnerships on boards or panels for single projects or major programmes, to community-led programmes resourced by public authorities. There are also independent activities in the 'third sector' comprising groups which range from established voluntary organisations (NGOs) to small informal groups which operate 'below the radar' of most public institutions but which provide services, undertake practical neighbourhood improvement projects, provide self help support and engage in policy debates, campaigns and protests.

The most useful simple analysis of participation is that undertaken by Shelly Arnstein in 1969, which summarised the most common forms of participation (Arnstein 1971).

<table>
<tr><td>Level 1</td><td>Manipulation</td><td rowspan="2">These levels assume a passive audience, which is given information which may be partial or constructed</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 2</td><td>Education</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 3</td><td>Information</td><td>People are told what is going to happen, is happening or has happened</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 4</td><td>Consultation</td><td>People are given a voice, but no power to ensure their views are heeded</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 5</td><td>Involvement</td><td>People's views have some influence, but traditional power holders still make the decisions</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 6</td><td>Partnership</td><td>People can begin to negotiate with traditional power holders, including agreeing roles, responsibilities and levels of control</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 7</td><td>Delegated power</td><td>Some power is delegated</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 8</td><td>Citizen control</td><td>Full delegation of all decision-making and action</td></tr>
</table>

Arnstein's ladder, as it is commonly known, has some important omissions, including those activities which contribute to democratic activity but which are not commissioned, led or controlled by government or other institutions, including those which are essentially about protest. It also focuses only on participation in decision-making, rather than including participatory action. This raises the important issue of what exactly is being participated in. In most cases, participation is analysed in terms of participation in public policy programmes led by government, NGOs or other institutions, but this remains only part of the picture.

Participation in sustainable development tends to be understood as essentially an engagement in policy debates in governmental policy development arenas. These range from global level stakeholder involvement (eg NGOs and business) in international policy discussion (eg WSSD planning meetings); European, OECD and other international policy forums; national forums, panels, commissions, inquiries, task forces etc (of which there are many); and, within the UK, regional round tables on sustainable development, and Local Agenda 21 activities. All these initiatives use various techniques to involve the public, voluntary organisations, business and other sectors of society for various reasons, including in order to gain access to their knowledge, gain legitimacy from consulting a particular constituency, and to promote knowledge and understanding of particular policy debates through access to these extra-governmental channels.

Why has participation become so important?

The reasons why participation has grown so fast can be grouped under four basic categories (although these do overlap):

- ethics (to do with rights)
- effectiveness (to do with better projects and programmes, including access to wider range of expert knowledges)
- strengthening governance and democracy (civil society, legitimacy of government decisions etc)
- opportunities for learning and change (social and personal change, including through capacity building).

The ethical arguments centre around the belief that people have a right to participate in the decision which affect them, based on the discourse of human rights and responsibilities which underpins UN resolutions (and other international treaties). The most obvious current manifestation of this is the UN ECE's Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, known as the Aarhus Convention. The Convention will upgrade public participation in relation to EU Directives on relation to environmental impact assessment, waste, water pollution, air quality, landfill etc. In commenting on the Convention, EC Commissioner Margot Wallstrom said 'Real environmental progress can only be achieved with the participation of the citizens concerned. The legislation is not only based on the belief that it is right for the public to be involved in decisions which affect them but also on the objective of making environmental legislation more effective and work better in practice' (European Commission 2001a).

The same approach is taken up in the EU’s 6th Environmental Action Programme, entitled *Environment 2010: Our Future. Our Choice*. In setting out environmental priorities for the coming ten years, it acknowledges that 'This is not just an issue for politicians and industry; it concerns all of us' and recognises that 'People want more of a say in how decisions are made which affect the environment, and that means access to clear and trustworthy information' (European Commission 2001b). The same sentiments appear in the latest UK Strategy for Sustainable Development, which states that 'Public involvement is essential for a truly sustainable community' (DETR 1999, para 7.87), and that 'Opportunities for access to information, participation in decision-making, and access to justice should be available to all' (ibid, para 4.1).

The arguments for participation on the grounds of 'effectiveness' centre around the practical benefits of including users, beneficiaries, stakeholders and constituencies (defined in many ways) in designing, implementing and maintaining projects and programmes. These practical benefits have been summarised as follows (InterAct 2001):

- financial costs saved or avoided in the long term by establishing appropriate solutions at an early stage which met 'felt needs'
- increased user satisfaction
- reduced conflict
- greater transparency and accountability
- increased equity by involving excluded groups
- strengthened capacity of stakeholders
- improved relationships between stakeholders
- improved public image, and greater public acceptance of projects and programme
- improved communications saving staff time
- greater stakeholder ownership, commitment and responsibility, leading to willingness to sustain benefits leading to, for example, reduced vandalism and thus reduced repair and maintenance costs
- less demand on control services (eg police)
- stronger communities
- greater willingness and ability of participants to be involved in other voluntary and community activities including wider civic and democratic engagement.

The growing interest in participatory approaches for reasons of strengthening governance and democracy stem largely from challenges to the role of government, both in terms of government seeing itself as less about 'delivery' and more about 'enabling' (certainly in the UK), and about the changing role of national governments in a globalised economy, in which government is seen as less willing (and able) to act on behalf of citizens (Macnaghten et al 1995). The situation has been summed up by British Minister Peter Hain as follows: 'as governments face diminishing control over events, those they govern want more control over their lives ... people want more say in the decisions that affect them. And they want to have this say more directly' (Hain 2001). However, the rhetoric about a reduced role for national governments can be seen as a tactical discourse in the globalisation debate, or simply as wishful thinking on the part of specific international lobbies (Christie and Warburton 2001), and this rationale must therefore be questioned.

What is not in doubt is that the legitimacy of governments has been undermined by the loss of trust in politicians and others (including scientists, cf Beck 1992). In the UK, the Parliamentary Select Committee on Public Administration has recognised that 'politicians are increasingly mistrusted and representative government is adversely affected' (SCPA 2001). At the same time, some in public institutions see the need for a stronger civil society as a counterbalance to the growing power of the market, and institutions dominated by private sector interests.

The most obvious manifestation of this decline in public engagement with representative democracy is in voting turnouts. In the UK, the turnout for the General Election in 1997 was 71%, the lowest since 1951; it was even lower in 2001, at which point it was the lowest turnout since the universal franchise. In the UK local government elections in 1999/2000, turnout was only 28% (although it was slightly higher in the most recent elections in May 2002), and for elections to the European Parliament turnout was 24%. In the UK, the Government sees public disengagement in electoral politics as part of wider social trends including reduced social capital and social cohesion, and growing alienation, all of which reduce the legitimacy of governments to make decision on behalf of their citizens: "The more people vote, the greater the democratic legitimacy of actions taken by those elected. Participation in elections is therefore crucial to, and a good barometer of, the health of democracy" (DETR 1998).

In the UK, these trends are prompting Government to consider new measures for increasing public engagement including deliberative democratic mechanisms (eg citizens juries), experiments in electronic governance (eg voting via the Internet), and the creation of a People's Panel. The Parliamentary Select Committee believes that 'the health of representative and participative democracy are intertwined' (SCPA 2001). There is also growing emphasis on improving the quality of dialogues which do take place between Government and citizens, including formal guidelines being introduced for how the Government consults on new policies and programmes. In the introduction to these guidelines, Prime Minister Tony Blair says 'Everyone gains by effective consultation. It improves policy and services by harnessing the experience and ideas of the whole community, opening the work of government to greater innovation and creativity. It is critical to the existence of trust between the Government and the people.' (Tony Blair 2001).

The rationale behind the 'learning' arguments for participation are also very broad. They range from Government interests associated with the previous point, with the aim of increasing public understanding of, and engagement with, public policy processes and thus contributing to capacity building and a stronger sense of citizenship, through to radical arguments for political education such as Freire's conscientisation processes (Freire 1996). In this view of participation, it is less the practical outcomes of the projects and programmes which are the priority but rather the personal and social transformations which can result from participating in an essentially political activity.

It can be seen from the above analysis that participation has become an essential element of public policy programmes, including sustainable development, for a range of complex reasons. It will also be noted that this is an approach which has support from across the political spectrum - from the right wing who see it as linked to self help and minimal government intervention, to the left wing who see it as a way in which oppressed groups can gain some power over their lives. However, in spite of its broad political appeal as a concept, in practice the majority of public programmes are still not participatory. Various reasons have been advanced to explain this gap between rhetoric and reality, but key among them (alongside simple inexperience with the methods) is a failure to develop effective evaluation mechanisms which allow policy makers to develop a shared understanding of what 'success' in participation looks like, and to assess participatory initiatives on that basis. This is clearly a complex, and highly political, field of analysis, but progress is now beginning to be made, as will be outlined below. First, however, a brief analysis of the extent and nature of participation in Local Agenda 21 will be presented, to provide some relevant context.

Participation in Local Agenda 21

Participatory approaches have been very important in the design and delivery of Local Agenda 21 (LA21) processes, both in the UK and more widely. Recent research (IDeA 2000) has shown that, of the 72% of local authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland which had completed LA21s at the time of the survey, 70% had provided support for community and voluntary groups as part of their awareness raising approaches, 42% had multistakeholder forums co-ordinating their strategies, and 30% had involved the community. These are self-reported findings, and the practice on the ground may not always have lived up to the full potential implied in these results. Nevertheless, as the latest UK Government research suggests that 93% of local authorities had completed LA21 strategies by December 2001 (SDU 2001), with still more under development, this is a major activity for local government and more research to assess the full picture of levels of participation would be worthwhile.

Similar results seem to be appearing in wider surveys, with the recent ICLEI survey suggesting that, worldwide, 70% of local governments with LA21 strategies in place solicit multistakeholder input, and many have established formal partnerships across different sectors (ICLEI 2001). The LASALA research shows more details, with 74% of LA21 co-ordinators reporting information being provided to the wider public, 67%

having an LA21 Forum or Group in their areas (87% in the Western Europe region), and 49% having active and representative community involvement in the LA21 implementation process (LASALA 2001).

The types of activities undertaken to encourage participation in LA21 are varied. LASALA research found that 80% of LA co-ordinators ran workshops and seminars, 72% did work in schools, 66% had working groups, 63% had an LA21 Forum or similar, 34% ran visioning exercises and 24% ran Planning for Real exercises. Earlier research into LA21 in the UK (Young 1996, 1997 and 1998) had already shown that LA21 had promoted many innovative approaches to community participation including visioning, community profiling and village appraisals, focus groups, Planning for Real exercises, forums, round tables, citizens juries and advisory committees. LA21 processes had also encouraged local community partnerships to undertake projects with social, economic and environmental benefits including on recycling, housing co-ops, LETS, credit unions and environmental improvements. These local projects, in turn, emphasised local democracy and citizen involvement, especially of excluded social groups. While a full analysis of the implications of all these results remains to be undertaken, the interim conclusions are that 'LA21 participatory programmes have become a conduit for the unleashing of energy and ideas into the wider area of the attempts to regenerate local democracy' (Young 1998).

LA21s may not (yet) have succeeded in making the UK more sustainable in terms of social, economic or environmental development, but LA21 exercises have clearly contributed to the development of policies and practices on governance: 'whilst many of the claims about LA21 are intractable to test, there is some evidence of genuine attainment. This relates mainly to processes of strategy production, stimulation of environmental citizenship, inclusion of various sectors, challenging traditional assumptions and actions, and assisting local democracy' (Selman 1998).

This is no mean achievement in terms of achieving sustainable development. As Kofi Annan has pointed out 'Good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development, By good governance is meant creating well-functioning and accountable institutions - political, judicial and administrative - that citizens regard as legitimate, through which they participate in decisions which affect their lives, and by which they are empowered.' (Annan 1998).

Various hypotheses have been offered to explain the emphasis on public participation in LA21 programmes. Young (1998) suggests that LA21 may have been seen as a unique opportunity for local government at a time of major resource constraints on other programmes, alongside some genuine fascination with the potential for innovation through sustainable development programmes. He also points to pressure from NGOs (eg WWF UK, see Webster 1998) and of practical guidance from local government support bodies (eg LGMB 1994) as possibly important stimuli. Young also suggests that the focus on participation developed as a result of the backgrounds and interests of those individuals who are responsible for delivering LA21 at local level, especially bringing in experience from community development, adult education and involving people in environmental activities (again NGO-led eg BTCV and Groundwork trusts). These approaches were well understood in planning departments, where LA21 activities were most often located, and where participatory working was widespread as a result of years of policy guidance and practice dating back to the 1960s (Warburton 2002).

In the UK, these developments have gone alongside a powerful impetus from national Government to 'modernise' government activities at all levels (local, regional and national), including a new and much greater focus on public and community participation. As Beverley Hughes, then Minister for Local Government, said of the Local Government Act 2000: 'At the heart of our modernisation agenda was the promise to give local people a better deal, a bigger say in how their communities are run.' (Hughes 2001). The new legislation introduced community strategies, local strategic partnerships, Best Value (which has its own requirements for consultation) and opportunities for local government to restructure their decision-making processes (with directly elected Mayors, cabinets etc), all of which have been designed to promote greater community involvement in planning and delivering services.

There have been some concern in the UK that the introduction of community strategies will mean starting all over again, ignoring previous community participation exercises, particularly LA21 strategies. Certainly sustainable development and LA21 staff often remain marginalised in many local authorities. However, the Government has made clear that they 'expect community strategies to build on the best of the work done to prepare Local Agenda 21 strategies, both of which have the aim of sustainable local communities at their heart' (Hughes 2001).

Emerging tensions around participation in LA21

There are some tensions emerging as a result of the growing focus on participation in LA21. There are the actual costs of running participatory exercises (which can be considerable, depending on the techniques used) and include staff time as well as financial costs for print, exhibitions, meeting rooms, facilitators etc. These costs need to be found at a time when existing budgets are already overstretched. But there are other problems too.

Stephen Young's assessment (1998) of participation in LA21 programmes in the UK found that some saw the results of participation as very limited in terms of impacts on policy decisions, as a result of resource limits, structural constraints (such as the organisational barriers of hierarchy and 'silo' departmental boundaries), and the fact that local priorities could be undermined by conflicts with, or shifts in, regional or national policy (eg on issues such as transport or waste management). This finding is supported by more recent evidence from LASALA that, although 73% of LA21 co-ordinators said decision-making processes were influenced by their multistakeholder forum to a 'high' or 'some' extent, and that possibilities clearly did exist for citizens to participate in decision-making, 'in practice, this is more complex, as accessing certain groups is difficult, and local authorities do not necessarily have the institutional capacity or resources to create real opportunities for individual citizens to participate' (LASALA 2001).

Research suggests an absence from participatory processes of certain groups, especially low income families, young people, ethnic minorities, older people, women's groups, disabled groups, unemployed people, businesses and unions (Young 1998, Craig et al 2001, LASALA 2001). The absence of the private sector and industry is not often noted, but 'in general, the participation of business and commerce in LA21 across Europe appears to be very limited' (LASALA 2001). When participation is seen as an awareness, learning and change exercise in pursuit of sustainable development, the absence of the private sector becomes particularly crucial.

Other problems include that one-off participation exercises (the norm) do not allow participants to accumulate the experience, knowledge and confidence which would encourage them to go on to other forms of citizen engagement - nor those running them to become confident with participatory working; there is lack of appropriate skills and experience among staff in public institutions in working with the public and other stakeholders (even at quite basic levels), and sometimes a lack of motivation among those who see their status as professionals being undermined by listening to 'lay' people; some elected councillors feel that public participation undermines their representative role, as do some NGOs who are uneasy about some direct government / public consultations which 'leapfrog' established organisations; potentially contentious problems have sometimes been placed outside the participatory exercises (eg proposals for new roads); and it is often difficult to integrate participatory initiatives either with established democratic institutions (eg elected local governments) and with more strategic planning at different spatial levels (eg regional planning and waste strategies).

For others (eg Brown 1999; White 1996), participatory processes can ignore the wider contexts of power and politics in which they operate, and can entrench and reproduce existing power relations rather than challenge patterns of dominance; they can be a vehicle for development on the cheap and support the retreat of the state from service provision, rather than being about democratisation and empowerment; they can be based on assumptions about the homogeneity of communities with shared interests rather than reflecting respect for diversity and complexity; and they can inappropriately minimise the role of scientific rigour and technical expertise to the extent that it can be ignored (Pollitt 1999).

Many of these problems can be addressed in well-designed participation programmes, but two key issues remain. Firstly, there are currently no commonly agreed methods of assessing the success (or otherwise) of participatory projects and programmes, and no commonly agreed criteria or indicators which can be used to test it. There is some experience of evaluating participation in specific fields, such as regeneration and community development, but only part of this work can be applied more widely. Secondly, as a result, there is little hard evidence of the effectiveness of participatory working compared to conventional, external, expert-led projects and programmes, and little understanding (beyond the anecdotal) of what works in different circumstances. Even in the current 'evidence-based' policy making circles in the UK, much of the impetus for increased participation comes from arguments of principle and of knowing what does not work (ie top down regeneration programmes which prioritise physical improvements rather than community engagement and social development), rather than what does. The remainder of this paper addresses these two issues in more detail.

Evaluating participation in sustainable development

The complexities of sustainable development, and the evolving understanding of the interrelationships between the issues, in theory and practice, have resulted in the development of many indicators and evaluation processes related to the social, economic and environmental issues. There are quality standards, such as EMAS and TQM, which often concentrate on the results from processes; standardised tools or models to measure public sector success or efficiency, such as the Public Administration Exellence Model, which do evaluate processes but have problems and weaknesses with adaptation for sustainable development; local, regional, national and international indicators, although these are primarily environmental and very few are associated with participation - even those associated with 'education' are rare: recent research found only 38% had educational targets in Local Agenda 21s, and only 24% had indicators for education (LASALA 2001). Certainly, to date, the governance elements have received far less attention than other elements of sustainable development. There is now some more detailed examination of the issues at international governance levels, with the publication of the EU White Paper on Governance, and the UNCHS Global Campaign on Urban Governance, but these have yet to impact upon practice and evaluation.

At national level, in the UK, there are also developments. The Modernising Government programme (mentioned above) is creating pressures for effective assessment methods for participation, and there is some initial work by the Audit Commission (December 2001) to develop performance indicators for community involvement. These developments are essential for the successful implementation of sustainable development for all the reasons outlined above in the summary of views from the CSD, UN and others.

Essentially sustainable development is a process, through which appropriate behaviours, policies and priorities are debated and determined. As Paul Selman says: 'sustainability is concerned as much with process as with product ... the journey is as important as the destination' (Selman 1995). The quality of the process will determine the legitimacy, effectiveness and acceptability of the policy outputs which result from the process, and thus the extent to which the public (and other stakeholders) will value, accept and 'own' the changes that will be required to lifestyles and aspirations.

It is therefore vital that clear methods and criteria are developed so that participatory sustainable development processes can be assessed effectively, so that lessons can be learned and progress made both in improving those processes and the outputs and outcomes that result. If no-one knows what success looks like, they cannot repeat it or improve on it.

Evaluating participation in sustainable development: benefits and limitations

Before outlining the benefits and limitations of participation in sustainable development, it is important to make clear the distinction between participatory evaluation and the evaluation of participation. A participatory programme can be evaluated using non-participatory evaluation methods, and a non-participatory programme can be evaluated using participatory methods.

Both are needed, for different reasons. More details are given below but, in brief, evaluation of participation is needed to begin to ensure that data is available on participatory working, which will allow assessments of good practice to be made (ie to achieve better practice in sustainable development in future). And participatory evaluations are needed to ensure the input of stakeholders into assessments of programmes of which they have knowledge and in which they have an interest (ie to achieve better evaluation and to meet ethical concerns about rights to involvement, as well as contributing to active citizenship and better governance systems).

The benefits of evaluating participation may include:

- Improving the practice of participatory working by capturing, analysing and sharing experience of good practice, and what works in different circumstances.
- Building support for participatory ways of working, by providing evidence of effectiveness and achievement, and learning processes to support often isolated workers.
- Contributing to the development of the theory and analysis of participatory working, including creating new theoretical models, methodologies and criteria for success which cover process outcomes (eg trust, ownership, understanding) as well as product outcomes (eg physical improvements, better air quality or greater biodiversity).
- Helps develop the sophisticated social science methodologies which are needed for sustainable development. The social science perspective explicitly recognises the particularity of context (including constantly shifting policy and political contexts and resource constraints), the complex

dynamics of the social world (including human motivations as well as social institutions) and the heterogeneity of settings for sustainable development decision making. Social science methodologies have helped transform the way sustainable development is understood by introducing issues which were barely recognised ten years ago (GEC 2000), including:

- uncertainty and complexity
- recognition of a diversity of 'publics' with diverse values, knowledges, cultural identities
- creating different ways of framing environmental risks and potential strategies to resolve problems
- recognition that different sectors have different abilities to tackle problems
- recognition that trust is a vital element in public perceptions of science and institutions, and that the development of inclusionary processes can help revitalise trust in science and policy.

- Helps develop new measures of processes to improve governance, an essential element of sustainable development. Conventional measures of performance, value for money etc in public services tend to be restricted to terms of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, but governance issues can introduce three additional e's: excellent, equity and empowerment (Jackson 1991).
- Go beyond 'consumerist' measures of quality to identifying 'social' measures eg of environmental goods, which are not just to do with consumption but also to do with altruism (or at least enlightened self interest).
- Value other forms of knowledge beyond the purely technical and scientific.

The limitations of evaluating participation may include:

- Evaluating participation can be costly in terms of time and money, in the short term (although they should save resources in the long term by increasing effectiveness). Participatory programmes are often run by organisations with limited resources, such as NGOs and community bodies (and some local authorities), who can barely fund programmes let alone research. New sources of funding may need to be identified if effective evaluations are to be developed in any coherent way.
- They require new methods of working which may be unfamiliar even to experienced social researchers. New methods always take more time, and will need to be developed and honed before they are fully effective.
- There are particular problems in evaluating any 'human service' programmes, as these never exist in isolation and it is therefore extremely difficult to assess the specific contribution of a particular programme to any given outcome, especially in view of the constantly changing policy and political contexts. Alcock et al suggest that the best that can be hoped for is to articulate what else is going on which may affect (or have affected) outcomes by using various methods of data collection and ensuring a range of perspectives is trawled (Alcock et al 2000).
- Timescales are critical. Many of the full impacts of participatory programmes are not apparent until many years after the initial activity, and mechanisms may need to be identified for capturing results over a long period (ten years or more). Ten years is now the timescale for community-based regeneration programmes in the UK, under the New Deal for Communities programme.

The benefits of participatory evaluation include:

- Providing an initial step to engaging stakeholders if the programme being evaluated is not participatory, or an additional step and continuing engagement if the programme is participatory.
- Better understanding of findings by funders, beneficiaries and other stakeholders as a result of them sharing discussions on the implications of the complexities of political and policy contexts, as well as more straightforward lessons.
- Greater ownership of findings by stakeholders as a result of helping to design and manage the evaluation process.
- Greater understanding among all stakeholders of individual and shared choices, values and assumptions, through jointly developing criteria for success.
- Access to a wider range of knowledges.
- Opportunities for reflection and joint learning, depending on the level of participation in the evaluation.
- Opportunities for 'reality testing' of findings if stakeholders can feed back on findings at early stages (or at least before conclusions are finalised).
- Capacity building and learning opportunities for researchers and other stakeholders as a result of joint working and sharing experience.
- Ensures a recognition that social scientists (like all scientists) are not value-free, by requiring that values, choices and assumptions are made explicit to stakeholders.

The limits to participatory evaluations may include:

- As with the evaluation of participation, there may be additional costs (time and money) at various stages.
- Also like the evaluation of participation, but possibly even more so, participatory evaluation is likely to require the use of new methods, unfamiliar even to experienced social researchers.
- The legitimacy of the research will depend to some extent on ensuring the representativeness of stakeholders, and appropriate mechanisms for accountability, which can be complex to identify and manage.
- Researchers are likely to have to manage conflicting pressures from different stakeholders, including potentially different value frameworks which will affect definitions of the success of the work.
- Results may be compromised if evaluators are not seen to be sufficiently objective, and appropriately distant from all parties: funders, commissioners and participants. Researchers are likely to have to develop relationships of trust with those whose work is being evaluated (to ensure there is access to all relevant data and to avoid secrecy and misinformation), while maintaining sufficient distance to be trusted by those commissioning the research (if they are different).
- The status of findings may be compromised if audiences for findings feel the results have been unduly influenced by those with a vested interest in the project or programme's 'success'.

Emerging tensions and models

Lessons from practice of evaluating participation in sustainable development are now beginning to emerge, which have revealed some complex tensions as well as some models. The central tension is around choices between participatory and non-participatory approaches to evaluating participation in sustainable development.

Research for the local government Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) in the UK, on poverty and social inclusion programmes, suggests that the approach to evaluation should reflect the objectives / values / criteria of the programme being assessed, eg participatory methods of evaluation for participatory programmes (Alcock et al 2000b). However, this seems to undermine the potential for developing participatory evaluations of non-participatory programmes, which can be a positive introduction to participatory working for those who have not worked in that way before. It also limits the potential for some evaluations of participatory programmes to include only limited participation in order to meet instrumental objectives, where consultation rather than a fully participatory evaluation is appropriate (Johnson undated). In addition, two evaluations of participatory programmes (evaluations which were not fully participatory according to Rebien's criteria) have produced some of the little 'hard' evidence on the effectiveness of participatory working that exist.

The first of these, by the World Bank, is a simple classic cost benefit analysis which compared the costs and benefits, over time, of participatory and non-participatory programmes funded by the Bank. Their findings showed that, overall, participation by beneficiaries was 'the single most important factor in determining overall quality of implementation', and made a significant contribution to project effectiveness including resulting in lower operational costs eg maintenance (World Bank 1994).

The second is an analysis, by the UK Department of Health, into the health benefits of participation. This research used traditional social science methodologies and concluded that there was an increased likelihood of people reporting poorer health generally, higher stress levels, higher prevalence of smoking, and poorer diet quality among those who felt they had a lack of control over decisions affecting life and a lack of influence over neighbourhood decisions, those with no involvement in community activities, those living in more deprived areas with a low 'neighbourhood social capital' score and, especially for men, those with no personal support group. Direct cause and effect are difficult to prove in research on health, but this research shows that those who feel empowered to make their own decisions, are engaged in community activities and live in places with strong neighbourhood social capital, are less likely to report poor health and less likely to have unhealthy lifestyles (eg related to diet and smoking) than those who do not.

The willingness of audiences sceptical of the value of participation to accept the findings of these two research projects clearly suggests another issue which needs to be taken into account in evaluating participation, which is to do with the status and reputation of the body commissioning the research, and the appearance of 'objectivity' of those undertaking the research and analysis. The relevance of these additional dimensions need to be taken into account in identifying appropriate methods for any specific evaluation study: the balance

between credibility among users and beneficiaries (as a result of greater control over process, outputs and outcomes) and credibility among funders and other target audiences.

The choices between using a participatory or non-participatory approach to evaluating participatory or non-participatory programmes will depend on the objectives of the evaluation. The objectives (what the evaluation is expected to achieve) are, in turn, likely to be based on the same four elements outlined earlier as the usual rationales for participation: ethics, effectiveness, strengthening governance and democracy, and opportunities for learning and change. Evaluation objectives, like those for participation programmes, may be instrumental or transformative (O'Riordan et al 1999):

- **Instrumental** evaluation is a means to an end (sometimes referred to as Habermasian after Jurgen Habermas). Instrumental approaches focus on practicality (eg achieving goals more effectively) and the legitimacy of decisions. Outcomes such as strengthened civil society and democracy could also be seen as instrumental. Relevant processes would focus on public reason, persuasion by the best arguments, production of consensus, and implementable and legitimate decisions. Evaluation criteria would be around the extent to which outcomes are do-able, and their legitimacy.

- **Transformative** evaluation is an end in itself, as well as a means to a better product (sometimes referred to as Arendtian, after Hannah Arendt). Transformative approaches would focus on a learning, responding, capacity building, citizenship process, and aim for empowerment, creative agency and self esteem. Relevant processes would be about a sense of recognition and agency, and of being part of a shared society through shared stories. Evaluation criteria would include the extent to which a process generated opportunities for learning, a sense of empowerment and agency, social intelligence and self fulfilment, as well as a sense of belonging to a shared society.

Sarah White expands these categories to four (White 1996): nominal (evaluation for 'display' eg PR purposes); instrumental (as above); representative (opportunities for groups to have a voice and express their own interests); and transformative (as above). Objectives such as strengthening civil society, enhancing democracy and enlargement of citizenship (or facilitation of other (eg state) agenda) could fit into either the instrumental or transformative models, depending on the motivations of whoever is promoting (and defining the objectives of) the participatory process and/or its evaluation.

Hunt and Szerszynski (1999) suggest associated tensions which can result between instrumental and transformative objectives for evaluations, including between problem-solving and relationship building approaches, cultural empowerment and structural change, digestibility and authenticity (ie between preserving the authenticity of participants own words and creating outputs which can be digested by institutions in the form of reports and recommendations, requiring 'translation'), ambivalence and consistency (recognising shifting policy and political contexts while also coming to some general conclusions which can be meaningful to decision makers).

Even when a participatory approach to evaluation is considered appropriate, further tensions arise. Firstly, it has been suggested that all evaluations are participatory, because they need to at least take into account the views of users, beneficiaries, stakeholders etc (Rebien 1996), but the degree to which they are participatory varies. Arnstein's ladder of levels of participation could be used to analyse the levels of participation in participatory evaluation, as well as in participatory exercises themselves, as Arnstein's analysis addresses the key issues of power and control. In evaluation of participation, the key questions are around value and judgements (Alcock et al 2000a), and the issues of power and control arise in addressing whose assessment of the work is valued and why and how that value is measured: what Robert Chambers summarised in the question 'whose reality counts?' (Chambers 1997).

Secondly, there are various different approaches to participatory evaluation. The first is 'fourth generation evaluation'. First generation evaluation is seen to be about measurement by a 'technical' evaluator; second generation about describing patterns of strengths and weaknesses by an evaluator operating as a 'describer' (and covering technical aspects); the third generation about judgement, with the evaluator operating as a 'judge' (as well as a describer and technical). Fourth generation evaluation is 'responsive constructivist evaluation', which is essentially 'participatory evaluation' in which the evaluation's parameters and boundaries are set through an interactive negotiated process with stakeholders (Guba and Lincoln 1989).

The 'theory of change' approach (which has been used in community development by CDF) is essentially a participatory planning process in which the goal is to generate a theory of change which is plausible, doable and testable and which makes explicit the pathways of change the project is expected to follow. Here,

theorising happens in advance and is then tested as the process unfolds, through 'theory surfacing' rather than imposing theory on a body of data (Connell and Kubish 1996).

The model designed by InterAct is designed to be participatory, but could be adapted for an evaluation which was only consultative: InterAct is an alliance of experienced practitioners, researchers, writers and policy makers in the field of public participation and stakeholder engagement. They aimed to produce a simple practical framework for evaluating participatory, deliberative and co-operative ways of working, to provide some immediate support to practice, and to increase the sharing of information about methods. The InterAct framework was trialled in an EU LIFE funded project on participatory river basin management, and was launched (with the Institute for Public Policy Research) in June 2001 in order to start a debate on the issues, leading to an updated framework later.

The InterAct framework provides a basic checklist covering both what needs to be examined when evaluating participatory processes, and how it should be done. In terms of what to look for, InterAct proposed the following issues need to be covered: objectives (how they were set, what they were, extent to which they were met etc); context (external and internal factors affecting the initiative); levels of involvement (based on Arnstein's ladder of participation); methods and techniques used; stage reached (not all evaluations are done at the end of projects); inclusiveness (extent to which efforts are made to reach traditionally excluded groups); commitment to using the results of the evaluation; baseline, inputs, outputs and outcomes (inputs in terms of time and money; outputs such as newsletters, reports; outcomes such as personal and organisational change - as well as practical changes such as reduced maintenance costs or increased leverage of support).

In terms of how to undertake evaluation processes, InterAct proposed that the following need to be taken into account: clear objectives; clear principles; designing for use (including identifying the needs and expectations of target audiences for the results); methods (finding appropriate methods depending on circumstances); stakeholder involvement (level and processes necessary to involve stakeholders in design, implementation and dissemination); indicators (including setting appropriate indicators with stakeholders); timing and timescales; cause and effect (recognising difficulties of proving direct links); embedding the process (ensuring evaluation is linked to wider management structures and processes, and reporting procedures); presenting the findings and using the results.

InterAct has also begun to share criteria and indicators which may be useful for evaluating participatory programmes, purely as examples to encourage others to develop the most appropriate indicators for their own programmes. Some examples are given in the Annex to this paper.

Summary and conclusions

In summary, this paper has described the centrality of participation to implementing sustainable development, described how participatory approaches have been used in delivering LA21s in the UK and more widely, and examined some of the tensions which have emerged. Some of the reasons why participation has become so important to public policy have been examined (focusing on issues of ethics, effectiveness, strengthening governance and democracy, and creating opportunities for learning and change), and the implications of these drivers for evaluating participation in sustainable development. Some of the tensions emerging from the practice of evaluating participation in sustainable development are identified, particularly the relevance of participatory evaluation, and some current key models are outlined: 'fourth generation evaluation', the 'theory of change' model, and a practical framework.

In conclusion, it is apparent that evaluating participation and participatory evaluation are still very new, and there remain many issues to be resolved in finding methods which can command wide support. Not even all those who are deeply engaged in participatory projects have necessarily been convinced of the value of evaluating participation at all - some still see evaluation as a doomed attempt to simplify and 'quantify' a rich, complex and highly political process through the use of crude criteria and indicators. Even apparently much more established processes of learning from good practice remain a developing art, with wide recognition that the evidence cannot show 'what works' but rather 'what works better that something else in particular circumstances'.

What is clear is that participation will be evaluated, and that those with the most experience and understanding of participation need to be engaged in designing those evaluation processes to ensure their expertise and knowledge helps shape appropriate methodologies. It is also clear that participation needs to

be evaluated, to assess the achievements of current approaches and create hard evidence based on rigorous research methods which can show balances between inputs, outputs and outcomes. Without this evidence, and the learning that can follow, the current boom in participatory working will start to wane, as it did in the 1980s after the previous boom in the mid 1960s to 1970s. This would not only be disappointing to practitioners and academics engaged in and committed to these approaches, but would have major consequences for the successful implementation of sustainable development, the credibility of governments, the strength of civil society, and the expansion of democracy. There is a lot at stake.

Tim O'Riordan suggests that 'The best evaluation is instructive, collective, continuous and appropriately correcting' (O'Riordan 1999). And the ideal situation may be to establish a balance between instrumental and transformative objectives, clear ethics and principles, participatory and non-participatory methods, qualitative and non-qualitative indicators that are appropriate (according to various audiences) and verifiable (ie numerical but also explanations of why and how), and agreement on timescales. Even where the ideal is not possible, some kind of balance needs to be struck to ensure that achieveable objectives, ethical principles, appropriate methods and learning from results can at least be aimed for in a new 'virtuous circle' of learning from experience in ways which also help to develop better methods of assessment. These evaluation activities also need to be undertaken in an appropriate way, and 'need to support the process whilst at the same time understanding and evaluating it - evaluation should ideally be linked to building capacities' (LASALA 2001).

A more consistent and strategic approach to public and stakeholder engagement is fundamental to sustainable development, democratic renewal, social inclusion, and a vibrant civil society, and such challenging and complex issues can only be tackled by processes that take full advantage of the added value that comes from wide ranging participation and collaboration. Effective evaluation methods are an essential part of that strategic approach.

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ANNEX A.
EXAMPLES OF INDICATORS AND CRITERIA

Example 1. Barclays Site Savers core indicators

The New Economics Foundation devised a set of indicators to test levels of trust in the Groundwork UK's programme of urban regeneration known as Barclays Site Savers. The idea was to identify some simple core indicators which could then be extended depending on local circumstances. The indicators included:

- 'I feel I could help change attitudes and improve things around here'.
- 'I have learned new skills on the project in the last 6 months'.
- Percentage of respondents saying: within the last 6 months I have enjoyed several conversations with a new person from a different age and/or background.
- Percentage of respondents saying: Neighbours around here look out for each other.
- Percentage of respondents saying: I think the project/facility will survive.
- How many new friends have people made through the project?
- Percentage of respondents saying: I know who to contact to help me change locally.
- Percentage of respondents saying: I have benefited from being involved with Groundwork.
- Number of people (previously unknown to Groundwork/the lead agency) involved in the project over the last 6 months.
- Number of agencies working with Groundwork (or working together) on the project.

For more information, see *Prove it! Measuring the effect of neighbourhood renewal on local people*, by Perry Walker, Julie Lewis, Sanjiv Lingayah and Florian Sommer. Published by Groundwork UK, Birmingham, and the New Economics Foundation, London, June 2000.

Example 2. Evaluation of Rural Action for the Environment

The criteria devised for this evaluation of a national programme included the following:

- Total funding from the programme, compared to match funding from elsewhere, to show levels of leverage.
- Types and numbers of projects funded, to assess extent and breadth of work undertaken.
- Types of groups receiving support, to assess 'reach' and inclusiveness of the scheme, and the extent to which the scheme reached 'new audiences' for environmental work.
- Capacity building, assessed by examining:
    - the amount of training and advice provided, and learning achieved
    - the extent to which groups have developed from their initial projects
    - the number of new groups supported by the scheme
    - the extent of participation amongst groups supported, calculated by assessing:
        - number of groups involved in the scheme
        - types of groups involved in the scheme
        - numbers of people involved in those groups
        - voluntary action person days
        - extent and quality of participation for those involved
    - personal testimony from those involved.
- Extent of Rural Action influence on others, assessed by examining:
    - examples of how mechanisms pioneered by Rural Action were taken up by others
    - examples of how certain organisations and institutions had changed priorities over the time Rural Action had been running (eg parish councils), with statements
    - examples of how local authorities had changed practices over the time the scheme had been running
    - examples of change to individuals who had been involved.

For more information, see *The Achievements and Effectiveness of Rural Action: An Evaluation*, by Diane Warburton. For The Countryside Agency on behalf of the Rural Action Steering Group, July 1998.

Example 3. LITMUS Project, south London

The following criteria were used for monitoring and evaluating impacts of the participatory process of the LITMUS project in Southwark, south London:

Evaluation of outcomes: qualitative criteria
- level of understanding about LITMUS
- level of trust / faith in LITMUS approach and consultation process
- involvement perceived as useful
- level of encouragement / facilitation
- level of ownership regarding LITMUS
- empowerment of the people / groups involved

Evaluation of outcomes: quantitative criteria
- number of individuals / organisations participating in LITMUS
- number of volunteers engaged
- number of volunteer hours/days spend
- continuity of involvement
- number of independent actions
- number of individuals / organisations acting as facilitators for LITMUS.

Example 4. Comedia

A Comedia study provides a useful example of how to measure the impact of participatory processes on personal change. The following questions were asked, inviting a yes, no or don't know answer.

- Since becoming involved, I have ...
  - .. become interested in something new
  - .. learnt about other people's cultures
  - .. become interested in something new
  - .. learnt about other people's cultures
  - .. been to new places
  - .. tried things I haven't done before
  - .. become more confident about what I can do
  - .. decided to do some training or course
  - .. felt healthier or better
  - .. become keen to help in local projects
  - .. been happier

- Has taking part had any bad effects on you?
- Do you feel differently about the place where you live?
- Has taking part encouraged you to try anything else?
- Have you learnt any skills by being involved?
- Could you do it better than you could have before?
- Was doing something creative important to you?

For more information, see Comedia's *Use or Ornament: The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*.